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Citizenship Classes for Bhutanese-Nepali Elders: From Cognitive Deficits to Cultural-Historical Understandings

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Abstract

This article focuses on home-based citizenship classes for Bhutanese-Nepali elders in Central Ohio in the United States. As part of a larger longitudinal study centered in the ethnographic, language socialization, and discourse analytic traditions, the article focuses on data, particularly regular audiovideo recordings, gathered over a five-month period and tracks one student's progress towards competence in answering a routine personal information question required in the citizenship interview. Although many learners and teachers center cognitive difficulties in preparing for this task, the complexities of this process are explored more broadly by using both the microanalysis of classroom discourse across time and social and cultural-historical explanations for why a Bhutanese-Nepali elder may struggle to respond appropriately, in English, to a seemingly simple question such as *What is your date of birth?*. The results of this article have implications for reflexive approaches to learning and teaching, community-based inquiry, and research on diversity and demographic change.

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1. Introduction

National citizenship is a cornerstone of one's legal status and personal identity, especially for refugees who have spent many years, often decades, in unstable legal and material situations. In the United States, refugees are generally eligible for citizenship after five years of permanent residence provided that the refugee completes the N-400 form, has no serious legal entanglements, and can pass a citizenship test. While these tests are not uncommon globally (Etzioni, 2007), as ideology they represent a state's posture towards welcoming, accommodating, and excluding migrants. Preparing for and passing this test is a significant step in an immigrant's journey towards legal inclusion in a new nation even if social, linguistic, and cultural acceptance for immigrant groups may remain elusive (Blommaert, 2013).

The U.S. government through the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) supports legal immigrants' journey to citizenship with various informational and learning materials. However, these are not always accessible to immigrants and their communities (Farrelly, 2013). Thus, many immigrant groups offer classes tailored to the learning needs of their community, such as this study's focus on one specific context, weekly home-based citizenship courses with Bhutanese-Nepali elders in Central Ohio.

In these classes, learning can seem slow, and many students and even teachers cite cognitive issues due to the aging process, previous injuries, or medication as the reason for learning challenges. Som (all names pseudonyms) a participant profiled below, often simply points at her head and says, *I forgot*, when she is unable to respond. These responses relate to broader patterns and stereotypes of aging learners which impact their well-being (Dionigi, 2015; Harwood, 2007; Keaton & Giles, 2016; Nussbaum & Coupland, 1995). However, this paper, drawing on an ethnographic, language socialization, and discourse analytic approach, argues that the surface and cognitive difficulties that an elder may demonstrate when attempting to answer a seemingly simple question such as *What is your date of birth?* mask the broader

policies of identity and cultural erasure that refugees, especially Bhutanese-Nepali, experience across their lifetimes. Although other studies of this community exist such as those focused on health issues (Aoe et al., 2015; Shrestha, Sharma, & Van Ommeren, 1998), social status (Bennett, Dahal, & Govindasamy, 2008; Evans, 2010), or even nationality (Kingston & Stam, 2015), to the author's knowledge this article is the first that addresses this specific community of elders and the context of citizenship classes.

This article starts with a description of relevant theory, research questions, methodology, and analysis. Then, in the results section, it offers an exposition and brief analysis of the communicative processes that one Bhutanese-Nepali elder experienced in achieving competency with the *What is your date of birth?* question. In the discussion section, the article explores the cultural-historical practices of citizenship and documentation experienced by the Bhutanese-Nepali refugee community and argues that, contrary to some narratives about refugees, they have rich and consistent traditions of biographical documentation and systems of time-marking. However, this article shows how these documents and systems have consistently been ignored, overlooked, or repressed throughout the elder's lifetime.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study is firmly rooted in the ethnography of education, language socialization, and discourse analytic traditions. Ethnography of education allows for deeper investigation of processes and patterns involved in learning and teaching, particularly by centering the learners' perspectives as much as possible through long-term engagement with the research site and participants (Green & Bloome, 2004; Spindler & Spindler, 1987; Zou & Trueba, 2002). Within this broader ethnographic tradition, language socialization considers the role of language in individual, family, and societal development (Duranti, Ochs, & Schieffelin, 2011; Garrett, 2008) while considering broader issues such as ideology (Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994), identity (Duff, 2008), and linguistic/social change over time (Vickers, 2007) across contexts, particularly in early childhood development, bilingual communities, and

schools (Bayley & Schecter, 2003; García-Sánchez, 2014; Ochs & Schieffelin, 1995). However, although people continue to move, learn, and adapt to new environments throughout the lifespan (Boulton-Lewis, 2010; Lee, Lan, & Yen, 2011), most research on elders, even that focused on civics or citizenship, tends to emphasize end-of-life care, health, and general well-being, overlooking the fact that many people, especially refugees, may still be seeking legal status late in life (Boggs, Rocco, & Spangler, 1995; Luppi, 2010). Indeed, the limited body of research on citizenship classes has also neglected the elder experience, focusing more on younger, more diverse learners with stronger English proficiency (Griswold, 2010, 2011). Thus, this article is, to the author's knowledge, the first to address a previously-identified gap in the language socialization research by focusing on a community that represents a nexus of concerns including the elderly, bilingualism, English language acquisition, and life-long learning (Duff, 2008; Garrett & Baquedano-López, 2002). Discourse analysis, as both method and theory, closely analyzes the speech people use in different contexts and seeks to uncover subtle internal patterns, modes of communicative coherence, and linkages to broader discourses such as politics, the media, or popular culture (Bloome, Carter, Christian, Otto, & Shuart-Faris, 2004; Gee, 2014; Rymes, 2009; Wortham & Reyes, 2015).

These three perspectives bridge methodology and theory and have led to important contributions to understandings of culture (McDermott, 1999; Street, 1993), its relationship with language (Agar, 1996), and various social and cultural constructions such as the understanding of time (Blommaert, 2015; Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Lemke, 2000, 2001). These insights have helped educators and researchers seek equitable outcomes by refocusing the educational experience on the learners' local context, lived experiences, and accumulated knowledge (Gutiérrez, 2008; Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003; Maitra, 2017; Moll, 1992).

3. Methodology

This paper is part of a larger, Ohio State University IRB-approved, study about

citizenship classes for Bhutanese-Nepali elders in Central Ohio where the guiding research question explored the social, linguistic, and cultural experiences informing learning and teaching in these spaces. From September 2015 to April 2016, a group of American and Bhutanese-Nepali teachers and researchers, including me, the author of this paper and coordinator of the project, videotaped classes at a local community center and in individual homes, conducted interviews with students, had regular playback/discussion sessions, and maintained field notes in the qualitative, ethnographic, and discourse analytic traditions (Atkinson, Okada, & Talmy, 2011; Blommaert & Jie, 2010; Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Gee, 2014; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Wolcott, 2001; Wortham & Reyes, 2015). The data corpus includes approximately 80 hours of classroom video from three research sites, nine audio-recorded interviews, and five playback/discussion sessions. The videos and playback sessions were all indexed and interviews transcribed. Sections relevant to the research questions were excerpted from the video and transcribed, allowing for the microanalysis of classroom events (Bloome et al., 2004; Moses, 2012). The playback sessions offered opportunities for the Americans to learn from the Bhutanese-Nepalis and vice versa, creating a community of practice informed by the funds of knowledge approach (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Moll, 1992). This approach addresses the issue that teachers from majority of languages and cultures, even those with many years of experience and commitments to culturally sustaining practices, require close connection and opportunities for inquiry to learn about new communities of learners. This is especially important for work with elder migrant communities that have not received as much scholarly attention as other age groups (Browne & Mokuau, 2008).

This article presents data and discussions related to my class. This class met every Friday afternoon for two hours in Som's home from December 2014 to April 2016. From December 2014 to August 2015, I took informal fieldnotes and audiorecorded one class. From September 2015 to April 2016, the research team videorecorded classes, conducted interviews, and had playback sessions. Although the attendance at my class

was erratic at times, a core group of learners formed with Som, her daughter Padma, Tara, and his wife Dhan. Other students came semi-regularly: Shiva, Kagi, and Som's daughter, Lakshmi.

4. Results

In this section, I present the core data starting in September 2015 that documents the progress one member of the group, Tara, went through to appropriately answer the question *What is your date of birth?*. However, much socialization happened in this class during the previous nine months including introductions to the interactional routine of the citizenship test and understanding the basic information in the N-400, some of the 100 civic questions, and simple reading/writing tasks. Moreover, I had learned a great deal about their lives, including religious practices, life in the refugee camps, and family structure. By

September 2015, all the members of the class could respond to many questions drawn from these three sections. Although they would not have passed the citizenship test, they were familiar with its fundamental structure, the types of questions asked, and some of the responses.

On the other hand, certain questions had become stuck in a routine that did not display competence with the question/answer form required of the citizenship interview. Among these was *What is your date of birth?*, but others might have included *What is your Social Security number?* or *What is your telephone number?*. I have chosen to focus on the date of birth question because it engages multiple levels of analysis indexing important elements of the Bhutanese-Nepali community's history and culture. Table 1 presents the beginning point of this interactional routine.

Table 1

Time 1, September 25, 2015

Line	Speaker	Text
1	Brian	Can you tell me your full name?
2	Som	Full name ke ho "Full name, what is it"
3	Tara	Tara Lohar
4	Brian	Tara Lohar
5		Very good
6		Where are you from?
7	Tara	Bhutan
8	Brian	Bhutan
9		Excellent
10	Brian	What's your date of birth?
11	Tara	Farmish
12	Brian	What's your date of birth?
13	Tara	<i>Looks to Som</i>
14	Som	Quati barsa arey "How old are you?"
15	Tara	<i>Looks to Dhan Huh</i>
16	Dhan	Quati bursa arey "How old are you"
17	Tara	Eh
18		Quati bursa thulo "How many years older?"
19	Dhan	Ah
20	Brian	Date of birth
21		What's your date of birth
22	Tara	65
23	Brian	You're 65 years old
24		Ok
25		So
26		The date of birth

27	Off-camera speaker	Para para gar “ Stay away ” to a child in the room
28	Brian	Tariq “ Date ” But the pronunciation is not likely to be recognizable to a Nepali speaker because it should be <i>Tarik</i>
29		Tariq
30		Tariq
31		Tariq
32		The day
33		For me
34		My birthday
35		My birthday
36		September 24, 1977
37		Yesterday
38		Yesterday was my birthday
39		Yesterday was <u>my</u> birthday
40		September 24
41		Ok
42	Som	Aba feri aauda chai huncha “ It will be there when it comes next time ”
43	Brian	Yeah
44		For me
45		I said
46		What’s my date of birth
47		September 24
48		What’s your date of birth?
49	Som	Date of birth kati ere “ What is the date of birth? ”
50	Brian	The tariq
51		The day
52		tariq
53		The day
54		You were born
55	Som	Koile dekhi ko arey “ When it is from? ”
57		Koile dekhi teti lagchau arey “ From when will you be of that age? ”
58	Tara	Dui maina cha “ two months more ”
59		Jaani dai na “ Don’t know ”
60	Shiva	<i>Laughs</i>
61	Brian	Not sure
62		Ok
63		So you’re 65
64		We’ll work on that one later

N.B. Transcription conventions: English in unmarked text, Nepali transliteration in bold with “English translation”, emphases underlined, [overlaps, *other semiotic facts in italics*. Bhutanese-Nepali members of the research team assisted me with the Nepali language.

In this section, Tara is quite comfortable with certain parts of the interactional routine. He is able to give his name, country of origin, and age. However, the question of his date of birth has not been mastered yet. In fact, part of this is due to previous repetition in the class. At line 11, Tara gives the answer *farmish** “*farming*”, anticipating another common

question, *What was your job in Bhutan?* When I repeat the question, Tara looks to Som, the household’s matriarch, and his wife Dhan. They both assist him in Nepali with *How old are you?*, and Tara answers that question appropriately. When I repeat the question, a loop begins with my trying different strategies to link to the requested information. The first

is my use of the term *Tariq*, which is a close approximation of the Nepali word for *date* but not the actual term for date of birth (see below). I had acquired this term because it is similar to another language that I know well, Arabic, with its word *Tarikh* for *date*. However, this cue is not taken up by the group. I then tried to personalize the information through my own date of birth, but Som's interpretation references a different question *When will your birthday be?*. Although Som does pick up the term *date of birth* at line 49, I

possibly confused Tara with repeated attempts at *Tariq*. Finally, Som seems to emphasize the birthday issue, causing Tara to guess at a future time but ultimately say *Don't know*. Shiva's laugh captures some of the comedy of this miscommunication, and I decided to accept the answer 65 and move on to a different topic.

This interactional routine had been going on for several months prior to this example and continued for several weeks, with a minor but important variation on November 20, 2015.

Table 2

Time 2, November 20, 2015

Line	Speaker	Text
1	Brian	Ok
2		Good
3		What's your birthday
4	Som (to Dhan)	Tyo ta malai pani audaina "That, even I don't know"
5	Brian	Your birthday
6		What's your birth day
7		Your date of birth
8		My birthday is
9		September
10		24
11		1977
12		When's your birthday?
13	Dhan	Kaushila k bhandai thiye "What was Kaoushila saying?" <i>About another person in the room</i>
14	Tara	Udne bela bhayo "Time for the flight."
15	Brian	Do you have your ID?
16		Your ID
17		Do you have any of your
18		IDs
19	Som	ID cha "Do you have your ID?"
20	Brian	<i>Gets driver's license out of his wallet</i>
21	Shiva	Tyo chai jahile birsinu parne k rahecha "Why do you always forget that?" <i>To Tara</i>
22	Brian	Tara
23		Do you have your ID
24	Som	ID chaincha "Need ID"
25	Brian	Do you have it
26		Do you have it
27	Tara	<i>Nodding head yes</i>
28	Brian	At home
29		So
30		Date of birth <i>Pointing to own state ID</i>
31		9
32		24
33		77
34	Som	Oye chiya coffee aaija yeta

		“Tea or coffee, come here” to two-year old granddaughter
35	Tara	ID then unintelligible Nepali statement
36	Som	ID liyaunu parcha “You have to bring your ID”
37	Brian	Your date of birth
38	Shiva	Usko ID chaina “He doesn’t have an ID”
39	Som	Huncha “Alright”
40	Som	Mero purse mai cha “Mine is in my purse”
41	Brian	So
42		Date of birth
43		No

The routine continued here, but the important addition is the reference to the ID and my request that the students bring their IDs. More importantly, this is taken up by Som starting at line 19 and Shiva’s remark at line 21 can be read as emotive and shaming of Tara. In what

will become a critical point later, there was a missed opportunity to see Som’s ID at line 40.

On December 11, 2015, Tara came to class about a half hour late. The routine started up, but here I sought help from Padma, Som’s daughter, who is more proficient in English.

Table 3

Time 3, December 11, 2015

Line	Speaker	Text
1	Brian	How do you say
2		Date of birth
3		In Nepali
4	Padma	Janma miti “Birthday”
5	Brian	Ok
6		So what’s your
7	Padma	65 hoo ta “It’s 65”
8	Tara	Ah 65 “Yes, 65”
9	Brian	I know you’re
10	Padma	Ma ninty six bhani raa chhu “I’m saying 96
12	Brian	What’s your
13	Tara	65
14	Padma	65
15	Som	65
16	Brian	Yeah
17		I know
18		There’s a difference between
19		How old you are
20		How old you are
21		And
22		What’s your date of birth
24		You’re
25		What
26		20
27	Som	<i>Tells the two-year-old Meriam in Nepali that she doesn’t know how to make the iPad work.</i>
28	Brian	How old are you?
29	Padma	29

30	Brian	29 ok
31		You're 29
32	Padma	<i>Tells Chandra, the mother of Meriam, that the internet for the iPad is not working.</i>
33	Brian	But what's
34		The date of birth
35		My birthday
36		Is
37		September 24
38		1977
39	Padma	1 9 96
40	Brian	1996
42		You're born in
43		1996
44		So what year were you born <i>Brian points at Tara</i>
45		Tara
46	Padma	Janma miti kaila aara "What's your date of birth"
47	Som	Kaila dekhi kati bhayo aara "From when, how much?"
48	Tara	Aaba monchar ko hoo, ka bhannu "I was born in Monchar, so what should I say"
49	Som	Qati bursa topai "How old are you"
50	Tara	Aaile sati ra pach barsa ko bhaya "I'm 60 and 5 years old"
51	Brian	1950
52		Probably
53	Tara	65
54	Brian	You're 65
55		Years old
56		Probably
57		Born in 1950
58		Ok
59		Good

Padma, the daughter of Som, plays an important role in this section by giving the proper Nepali term for Date of birth *Janma miti*. Although there is some negotiation of meaning in the initial section, at line 46, Padma correctly articulates the question for Tara. Som offers a gloss of the question, and Tara responds appropriately at line 48. However, the challenge here is that the birth month he gives, *Monchar*, is the Nepali calendar, which is different from the Gregorian. It is possible to convert dates from the Nepali calendar to the Gregorian, but unfortunately Som reorients the discussion to age at line 49, which Tara responds to at line 63. Most

importantly, Tara's statement was not interpreted to me by Padma. Thus, I offered my guess at Tara's year of birth, which was not challenged or expanded upon. At the end, I moved on to another topic.

Then, the critical moment comes on December 18, 2015. In the midst of a discussion about the date of birth with Som, I asked her if she had her IDs available. She does, and I asked her to bring them out. When she brings them, many elements about this question are put into a relevant context, specifically the date of birth on an official U.S. identification document.

Table 4
Time 4, December 18, 2015

Line	Speaker	Text
1	Brian	<i>Spoken to the whole group</i> The Green Card has your date of birth
2		<i>Pauses for 15 seconds while Som gets documents</i>

3	Som	<i>Brings in documents</i>
4	Brian	All right
5		Let's see what you got here
6		All right
7		Yes
8		Ok
9		Your Green Card
10		Ok
11		Ah, look at this
12		Som
13		Som's date of birth
14		Ok
15		Date of birth
16		Right here <i>shows to Tara</i>
17		Date of birth
18		1 st January 1936
19		January 1 st 1936
20		Som
21		This is you
22		January 1 st 1936
23	Tara	[1936 <i>repeating the date</i>]
24	Brian	See
25		Can you see this <i>Som comes in very close to see the card</i>
26		Right here
		Date of birth
27		Date of birth
28	Tara	Lumbers ta tesi re po deko hodo rachaya "Numbers are given in that way"
29	Som	Aai sapai deko cha ne ta yaha "Everything is given here"
30	Brian	Date of birth <i>Writing this on the white board</i>
31		Yes
32		Social Security Card <i>Takes card from Som</i>
33		Alright
34		Now we are getting somewhere

This section is critical because the presence of the Green Card and other documents allows me to say the words, point them out in the group, and write them down on a small white board. Som, Tara, Dhan, and Shiva then have the chance to see this information written out and begin the process of practicing and repeating. Moreover, at line 28, Tara indicates his understanding of the ID's presentation of the biographical information, even using the word *Lumbers*, a recognizable pronunciation of the English Numbers, which Som picks up and affirms at line 29. The section goes on, and I am able to write out the Social Security Number and A-Number, two other critical pieces of information for the N-400. Although Tara and Dhan do not have their IDs with them at this time and the other question/answer routines remain the same for several weeks, the basic fact that Som's information is

now clear changes the dynamic in the group now that Som can appropriately respond, with some assistance, to the date of birth question, seen in the next section on January 8th, 2016.

In this class, two semi-regular students, Kagi and Buddha were there. Kagi is a younger neighbor and Buddha is Som's other daughter. Both are more proficient in English, and Buddha had even sat for the citizenship interview but did not pass the first time. During the course of the class, I brought back Som's personal information from the Green Card and wrote that on the small white board. I also made the point that it was, according to this document, Som's 80th birthday the prior week. Although I knew that celebrating birthdays was not common for this generation, the family does have a small two-year old, and on the wall of the apartment is a sign saying "Happy Birthday" left up from last year's celebration.

Table 5

Time 5, January 8, 2016

Line	Speaker	Text
1	Brian	Som
2		What's your date of birth?
3	Som	<i>Looks confused and looks at Buddha</i>
4	Buddha	1 1 1936
5	Som	[1936
6		1936
7	Brian	1936 <i>correcting Som's pronunciation a bit</i>
8	Som	1936
9	Brian	Som
10		You can say January 1 st 1936
11		Or
12		1 1 1936
13	Som	January 1 1936
14	Brian	19
15		1936
16	Som	I'm a died <i>laughs</i>
17	Brian	No
18		You're alive
19		You're here
20	Som	Sick
21		I'm a died
22	Brian	No
23		Until
24		You're still alive now
25		So let's keep it going

Here, we can see that Som has started to master the basic routine of the question. Although she needs help from Buddha and me, the basic form is correct. Critically, during Tara's time (not shown), he also started to say *January 1st* for the day of this birth, but he still lacks the year. The important fact here is that Som, the ad hoc leader of the group, is now a model for Tara.

January 15, 2016 is the second critical day because

Tara and Dhan bring their Green Cards. When they first arrive, Dhan gives the cards to me, and I say *Yes! Yes, these are very very useful* and then put them down on the floor. After working through some other material, I picked up the Green Cards, wrote their information on the white board, and engaged with the information. Importantly, Lal, Tara's teenage granddaughter was there. Lal had come to class multiple times, filling an important role as translator and co-learner in the group.

Table 6

Time 6, January 15, 2016

Line	Speaker	Text
1	Brian	Ok
2		Let's think about
3		Important question from the N-400
4		Som
5		What is your date of birth
6		What is your date of birth
7	Som	My date of birth
8	Brian	What's your date of birth
9	Som	January 1
10	Brian	Yes
11		Good
12		For Som
13		January 1

14		1936
15	Lal	<i>Yells at her nephew, telling him to not put his legs on his great-grandparents</i>
16	Brian	Very good
17		Som
18		Som's date of birth is
19	Som	January 1
20	Brian	1936
21		Now
22		Shiva, do you have your Green Card <i>She shakes her head "no"</i>
23		Ok
24		Dhan
25		When is your date of birth?
26	Dhan	January 1
27	Lal	January 1, 1952
28	Brian	1952
29		Right there <i>Points to white board</i>
30		January 1 1952
31		That's Dhan
32		Tara
33		<i>You are Brian picks up Green Card</i>
34		1951
35		<i>Writes the date of birth on the white board, places it in front of Dhan and Tara</i>
36		Now Dhan
37		How old are you?
38	Lal	Temi kati barsa bhayau "How old are you?"
39	Dhan	65
40	Brian	<i>Calculating age on smart phone</i>
41		I think that she's 64
42	Lal	64
43	Brian	Because 1952, jump ahead to 2000
44		1952, 1962, 1972, 1982, 1992, 2002, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016 <i>Counting up with hands out</i>
45	Tara	[January January January
46		64
47	Lal	I think before she was 64
48	Brian	So Dhan you are 64
49		Tara
50		Date of birth Tara
51	Lal	<i>Takes Tara's small notebook him and writes the date of birth in it</i>
52	Brian	Ok
53	Tara	Maile birsi hala aagi ka bhana bhana "I forget what I said before"
54		Som
55		What is your date of birth
56	Tara	First January 65
57	Brian	January 1 1951 <i>Reorients to Tara and points at white board</i>
58		You're 65 years old
59		You're 65 years old
60		Your date of birth
61		January 1 1951
62	Tara	Aaru sabai aaki dekhainchan "All other looks similar"
63	Padma	1936 <i>Spoken while sitting on the couch behind Som</i>
64	Som	1936
65	Brian	1936
66		January 1 1936
67		Good

On this day, the various semiotic systems come together. First, the Green Cards are there with the essential data, which I write down onto the white board. Second, Lal, the granddaughter of Tara and Dhan, is there to interpret and, critically, writes Tara's date of birth into a small notebook that he brings consistently to class. Finally, Som and Devi are collaborating to help her master the interactional routine with some assistance from Lal, Padma, and me.

As a result, Tara is able to put the main pieces of the appropriate response together at lines 45 and 56. I say full appropriate response at line 61, and he has this information written into his notebook. Following this time, on January 29, 2016 and beyond, Tara can, with minimal help, answer the date of birth question appropriately.

Table 7

Time 7, January 29, 2016

Line	Speaker	Text
1	Brian	Tara
2		How old are you?
3		65
4		What's your date of birth
5	Multiple voices	<i>Offering some support</i>
6	Hem	<i>Points at Tara's notebook</i>
7	Tara	<i>Looks at notebook</i> 1 January 1951
8	Brian	Ok
9		Good

5. Discussion

From an educational perspective, this interactional routine may seem trivial or avoidable. It is clear that the addition of the IDs was a turning point, and perhaps I could have avoided the entire situation by simply requiring that students bring this document to each class. However, looking beyond the surface level, there are at least four other aspects that contribute to a dynamic explanation of the learning and teaching processes at play here.

The first is the aforementioned cognitive level. Although this article seeks to transcend purely cognitive explanations and show that learning certainly can and does happen across the lifespan (Findsen & Formosa, 2012; Lawhon, Ennis, & Lawhon, 1996), the challenges that older learners have in acquiring new information are significant, particularly in second language acquisition (Granena & Long, 2013; Ortega, 2008). Moreover, as Som indicated on January 8, 2016 at lines 16-25, the fact that death is a much closer reality for this group impacts their learning experience.

The second is the classroom context. The transcript sections describing multiple side conversations and dealing with young children at home attempt to illustrate in text how this context may not be ideal for learning and teaching in that it is often difficult for participants to hear each other or focus on the learning material.

The third is the basic structure of the classroom discourse and, in Vygotskyian terms, who is considered the "More Knowledgeable Other" in the Bhutanese-Nepali context. This is a normal part of any learning and teaching environment, but sometimes the lack of clarity creates confusion or obscures opportunities for learning. Although I am the "teacher" in the space, it is clear that Som, as the matriarch of the home, the oldest member of the group, and the most vocal overall, guides the interpretation of my questions. Her confidence in her knowledge manifests first through her translation of date of birth to age, which is taken up by Tara multiple times in the sections above. This is even true when other, potentially more knowledgeable students, such as Padma are present such as in the example on December 11, 2015. Although Padma's English and

understanding of the citizenship content is stronger, Tara listened to Som over Padma. Indeed, it is only when Som becomes competent in the “date of birth question” that Tara starts to model this correctly. This reveals some of the underlying ideology of this learning community that age and status at home are quite powerful factors. Another factor may be previous socio-economic status in that Som’s husband and family, although with low caste status, were wealthy merchants in the Bhutanese village that the group members come from.

The fourth and focus area for this paper is the multiple roles and interactions of culture and language that are invisible in the discourse above but impact deeply the teaching of learning. This starts with the fact that the date of birth on a U.S. identification document such as the Green Card is problematic. In interviews with Bhutanese-Nepali refugees, they have made it clear that their Bhutanese identity documents were often missing or incorrect because the Bhutanese government forced all Bhutanese-Nepalis to return their identification documents before evicting them from the country. These included their Bhutanese citizenship documents, passports, or school registration forms. Moreover, many elders did not even receive these documents in their lifetimes because the Bhutanese state was not sufficiently organized when they were born or they did not attend public schools.

Moreover, as refugees for almost 20 years in Nepal, they were also denied legal citizenship or residency, and, when the opportunity for resettlement arose in the mid-2000s, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) officials in charge of the process of resettlement were not particularly concerned with getting these biographical details correct. Bureaucratic efficiency was the most important principle to empty out the refugee camps, and many of the refugees who did not have identity documentation or even a clear memory of their biographical information were given a date of birth of January 1st and a year based on whatever age the refugee self-reported. This was a bureaucratic move to simplify the process but has led to a perception

and partial reality that many refugees do not have stable or correct information on their identification documents, creating an additional burden for the learner to memorize an arbitrary date of birth.

The next element is social practice in the U.S. related to these identification documents, especially their I-94 or Green Card, Social Security Card, and state ID. Before and after refugees arrive in the U.S., they are given a cultural orientation during which they are told to keep these identification documents safe and secure at all times. Som, for instance, had her documents hidden in a purse in a closet and only brought them out when I asked her to. Moreover, many elders do not use their dates of birth in their day-to-day lives because institutional interactions are mediated by their children. For example, if they have to go to a hospital or other institution, their children or interpreters will manage the documents and even answer these identification questions on behalf of the elder. Also, birthdays are not a commonly celebrated event for the elder community although this practice is being adopted for the younger generations.

However, this is only part the explanation, and leaving it here would promote a deficit perspective of the elders and their experiences, arguing that their poor memories, refugee experiences, bureaucratic incompetence, and social isolation have left them passive and without legitimate knowledge of their own lives. To counter this, it is essential to point out that Bhutanese-Nepalese are born into a broader context closely aligned with Hindu religious and cultural practices (Lipner, 2012). When a person is born, he/she receives a document called a *Cheena* that records exact information about that person’s date and time of birth, the position of the stars, and some astrological predictions. This document is essential to a person’s identity and used across the lifespan to help the person make decisions and solve problems. This document is written in Sanskrit and/or Nepali and can be interpreted with the help of a trained priest.

Jhuma, a friend and ad hoc member of the research team, provided this example of his *cheena* for the paper.

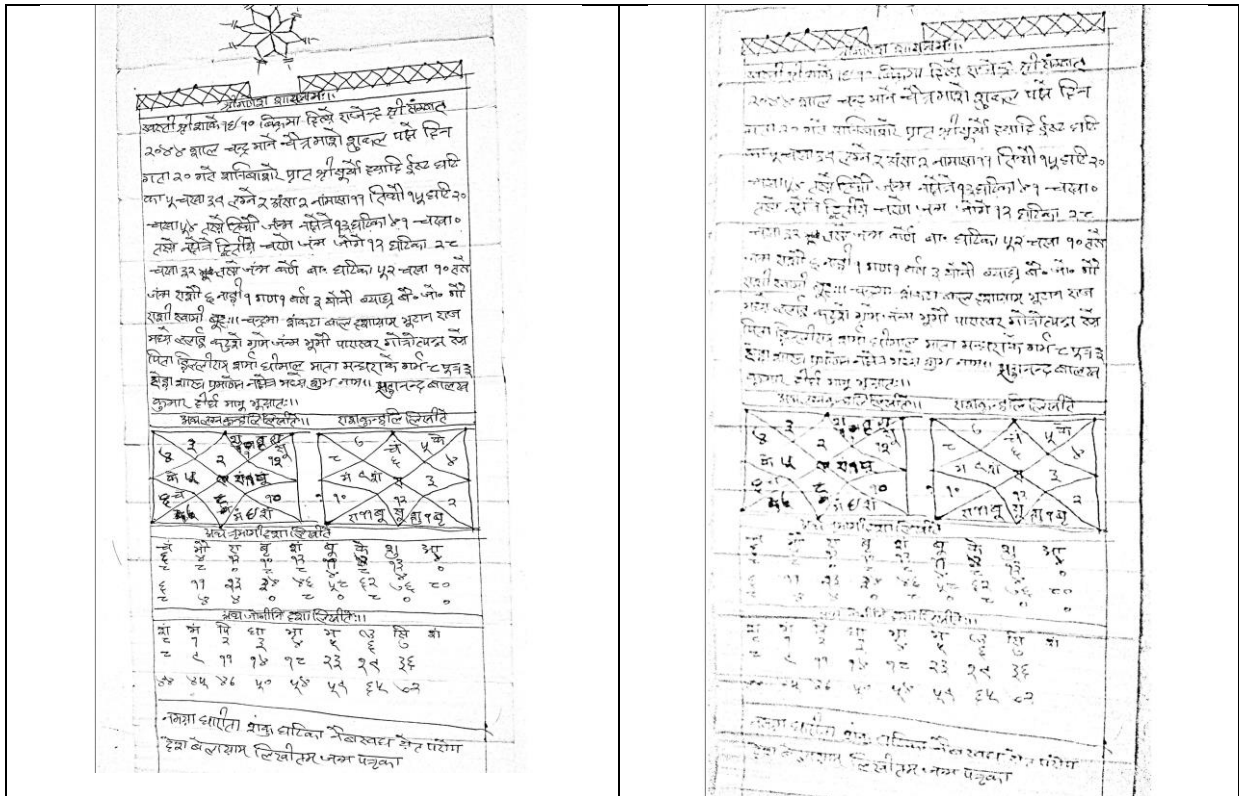


Figure 1
Jhuma's Cheena

Jhuma's date of birth is recorded exactly in the Hindu calendar on the first page in the second and third lines. This includes not only his birth day but also the exact minute, the position of the birth, and other details. The diagrams record the position of the stars, essential for astrology.

Virtually all Bhutanese-Nepalis receive this document at birth, a tangible and highly accurate birth record. Thus, the *cheena* argues against the notion that Bhutanese-Nepalis do not have clear identity papers or would not be familiar with a concept such as date of birth. They do, as Tara's statement at line 48 on December 11, 2015 made clear. However, the problem is that the *cheena* has generally not been given legal value in Bhutan, Nepal, and in the U.S. For example, in the resettlement process, the *cheena* was not used to clarify the date of birth. Perhaps this is because converting from the Nepali to Gregorian calendar would require paying for the time and skills of a priest. Another reason is that some people lost their *cheenas* during the flight from Bhutan or in fires in the Nepali refugee camps. Jhuma's example here is in fact a copy made in Nepal after his original was left in Bhutan—

a standard *cheena* would be much more beautiful, embellished with colored inks and other designs.

In the group, Som told me that her *cheena* was destroyed in a fire in the refugee camps. Because her house was far from the river in the center of the camp, the fire consumed everything. At the time of writing, I do not know the status of Tara's *cheena* because he recently fell ill and was in the hospital, a stark reminder that these classes happen against the background of advancing age, illness, and mortality. In general, the issue of the *cheena* is a reminder that documentation is a neutral, transparent, and equally legal process; indeed, those with "legal" documentation often use that power to deny it to others.

Routinized questions/answers with initiation-response-evaluation patterns are a large part of the educational experience (Mehan, 1985). In the context of the USCIS citizenship interview, they are the basic type and, in that sense, present a relatively low bar for learning and teaching. However, this article argues that the process of acquiring even the basic biographical information in the N-400, much

less the demands of the civics or reading/writing sections, indexes manifold challenges for the learner. These include, at least, the cognitive demand of learning new, arbitrary information later in life, the sociocultural challenge of classrooms with various and often competing sources of knowledge, the legal practices involved with preparing and using U.S. identity documents, and the cultural-historical fact that a key identity document—the *cheena*—that would be a clear bridge to a question such as *What is your date of birth* has been systematically ignored across the learner's lifetime.

However, I do not wish to present these learners from a deficit perspective. Certainly, learning challenges exist in this group, but the data show clearly that these elders can and do master new interactional routines, even in environments that are informal, infrequent, with multiple distractions, and with teachers from different languacultural backgrounds. Indeed, as one committed to reflexive and critical praxis (Foley, 2002; Freire, 2000; May & Sleeter, 2010), I must acknowledge my limitations, foremost my lack of Nepali language ability. Although I listen carefully to students and respond to the spoken and paralinguistic cues, I miss certain opportunities. For example, if I had known Nepali on December 11, I might have been able to support Padma's correct articulation of the question, pick up on Tara's appropriate answer, and redirect Som's reorientation to the age answer. Then, we might have been able to determine Tara's actual date of birth by converting the Nepali date to the Gregorian. However, these moments passed and only became clear through this reflective research project. This situation almost certainly happens to many teachers working with new languacultural groups. There is little doubt that a fully bilingual Nepali-English teacher would be more skilled in this space, but even then there are challenges. Om, a Bhutanese-Nepali member of the research team and now a U.S. citizen, reported that his students often requested a "real American" teacher for his in-home sessions; he theorized that students mistrusted his knowledge.

Beyond the classroom, this study is part of a larger context about the nature of the Central Ohio and the Midwest that, in the past 20

years, have gone from being relatively homogenous to diverse (Pipher, 2002). In the last 10 years, Central Ohio has received many Bhutanese-Nepalis through the process of refugee resettlement and secondary migration, and estimates at the local population number range between 10-20,000. The Bhutanese-Nepali community has established itself well in schools, businesses, and other aspects of social life, and the city has generally been regarded by the community as welcoming of this population and other migrants. Thus, this study may contribute to discussions of globalization, super-diversity, and multilingual cities (Block, 2006; Blommaert, 2013; King & Carson, 2016; Vertovec, 2007) in that many urban services—schools, hospitals, nonprofit organizations, etc.—are developing to meet these new populations' needs.

This study has certain limitations as a small-scale analysis of one classroom that may or may not be applicable to other contexts. In addition, there are other possible explanations or areas to explore in this nexus of cognitive, sociocultural, and cultural-historical explanations. However, this process of researching teaching and learning with the Bhutanese-Nepali elder community has broader implications. Intentionally combining a variety of qualitative methods in education—interviews, playback sessions, multicultural research teams, and the micro-ethnographic analysis of classroom events—creates opportunities for mutual respect and unexpected learning that can subvert deficit discourses about refugees, their lives, and their potential for learning across the lifespan.

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